

# Health tsars: spin or substance?

Eight health directors (“tsars”) were appointed from 1999 to 2002. **Katherine Burke** asked them to summarise their achievements and other people to assess their work. A ninth “tsar”, Dr Sue Roberts, was appointed in March 2003 to cover diabetes. The full text is accessible at [www.bmj.com](http://www.bmj.com)



**Professor Mike Richards**  
National cancer director  
Appointed: November 1999

**My achievements:** I led the development of the NHS Cancer Plan (published in September 2000), and since then I have been overseeing its implementation. Over the past three years, smoking cessation services have been established across the country, tobacco advertising has been banned, and awareness of the importance of eating fruit and vegetables has been raised through the “5 a day” programme. Screening programmes are being extended and waiting times are being reduced. Unprecedented numbers of new scanners and radiotherapy machines are being installed. Hospitals and primary care services are working much more closely together across cancer networks to ensure that care is better coordinated. Far more patients are being cared for by specialist teams. Extra financial resources have been put into cancer and palliative care services. Major new research initiatives are beginning to yield dividends.

## What others say

**Joanne Rule**, chief executive of CancerBACUP: Whether a national cancer director contributes significantly to progress depends very much on the person. Mike Richards is exceptional. Under his leadership, cancer networks have started to make a real difference. We are not uncritical. We believe that continuing ringfenced investment in cancer networks would make the most difference, and we'll continue to push for this.



**Dr Roger Boyle**  
National director for heart disease  
Appointed: March 2000

**My achievements:** Since my appointment, thanks to the hard work of thousands of dedicated NHS staff, major progress has been made. Cigarette advertising has been banned; over 300 000 smokers have been helped to quit. The national school fruit scheme is providing one million children with a free piece of fruit each schoolday. In primary care, the number of prescriptions for statins has risen by 30% each year.

In emergency care, we have seen steady improvement in ambulance response times and improvement in delivery of thrombolysis. The targets to reduce waiting times for heart surgery have long been eclipsed.

## What others say

**Professor Roger Hall**, division of cardiology, Hammersmith Hospital, London, and editor of *Heart*: It is hard to say in a concrete way what would have happened had he not been there as cardiology has always been quite well organised. The real benefit is that there is an established route [to government] and someone at the table who is respected by both the profession and the government. Roger Boyle fits this bill. I think it is difficult for one person to represent the whole specialty—Roger is a cardiologist at a district general hospital, and, although well versed in theory about tertiary centres, he does not work in one.



**Professor Louis Appleby**  
National director for mental health  
Appointed: April 2000

**My achievements:** My first day in post saw the start of the process that led to the NHS Plan, and the crucial task was to make sure that mental health—one of the government's clinical priorities for the next decade—was in it.

The NHS Plan launched a set of new services intended to plug the most conspicuous gaps in the mental health system. It brought in community teams for vulnerable patients who might otherwise drift out of care, early intervention for young people with psychosis, and home treatment.

We followed it with a set of strategies in areas of neglect—such as services for ethnic minorities and for patients with both mental illness and drug misuse.

We set up the National Institute for Mental Health in England to make sure that policy turned into action at local level. We found money to refurbish inpatient wards.

## What others say

**Richard Brook**, chief executive of MIND: Louis is responsive and genuinely committed to ensuring quality mental health services. He has always been interested in understanding service users' concerns. But the political drive for change seems to be ebbing, and it is here that service users especially feel more could and should have been done by the tsar.



**Professor Ian Philp**  
National director for older people's services  
Appointed: November 2000

**My achievements:** The national service framework for older people has changed NHS culture, particularly in relation to age discrimination. It used to be routine to refuse patients heart bypass surgery if they were old. But since the framework was published the number of people aged over 65 years getting heart bypass surgery has risen by 16% and the number aged over 80 has increased by 65%.

Another achievement has been the development of intermediate care services to bridge the gap between patients' acute care in hospital and their returning home. More than 200 000 elderly people have benefited.

I have also maintained change while taking people with me. I have set up a coalition of over 50 organisations—professional groups and advocacy groups—which are working with me nationally.

## What others say

**Dr David Black**, consultant geriatrician and chairman of the England council of the British Geriatrics Society: To be treated as a priority area in the current NHS you need a tsar. There can be no doubt that having a geriatrician as a national director has helped geriatric medicine. However, the appointee is still a government employee. Professor Philp and other tsars find that it is not always easy being in a leadership and management role rather than in a role as a representative for a specialist society.